

# Ethnocentric Mambo in Catalonia

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Pau Marí Klose Di 22 Mai  
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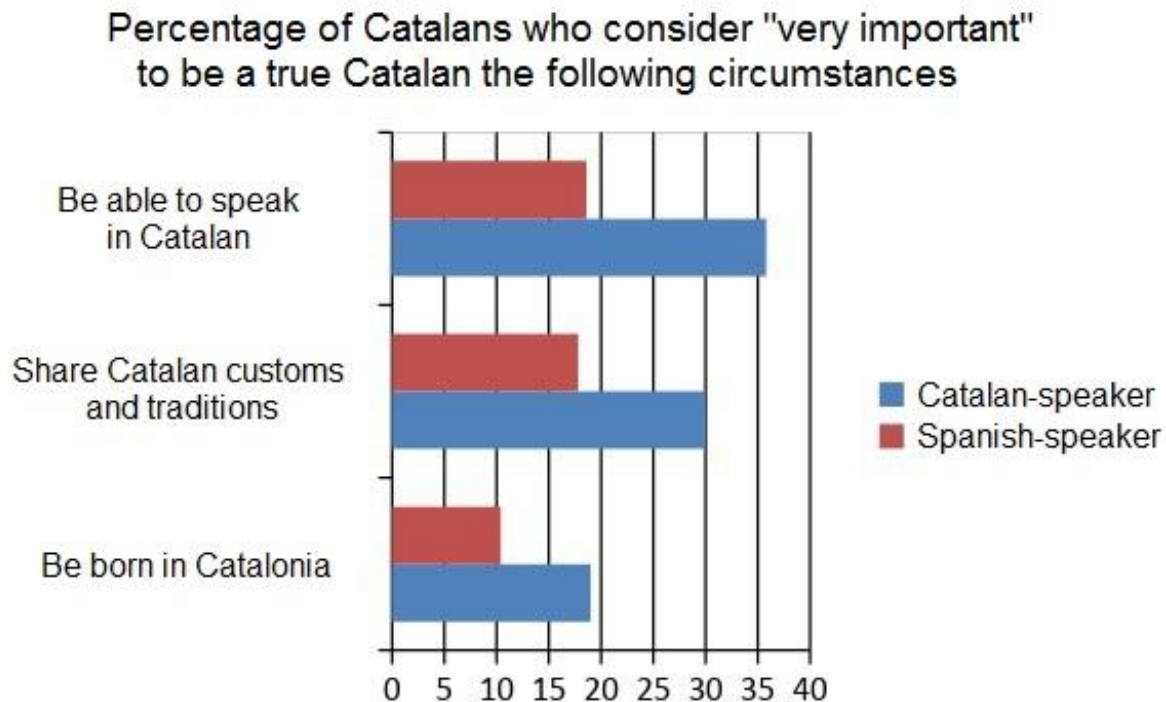
Catalonia is a fragile object. As in many other places, history has assembled fragments without completely fusing them, leaving behind scars that remind us of the effort required to join what is diverse. These scars demand special attention because, contrary to societies where the wounds that produced them are old and almost forgotten, in Catalonia many of the wounds were still suppurating just a few decades ago. As they do now. For months, we have been at risk of tearing them open.

Over the twentieth century, several migratory currents converged in Catalonia, attracting, in several waves, large human groups from other Spanish regions. Their arrival raised suspicion and fear in some local political circles and intellectual elites. Demographer Josep Antoni Vandellós was, in the thirties, one of the first to express concern about the dangers of immigration as an element of de-Catalanization and social instability. Heavily influenced by the ideas of eugenics and by the climate of social unrest that existed in Catalonia during the first third of the century, he proposed measures to foster natality and the use of urban policy to channel the unavoidable influx of people arriving to a region undergoing rapid industrialization and disperse them across the territory. He also advocated for the implementation of “cultural immersion” policies. Fear of immigration’s diluting effect shows up in different ways in more recent decades. Some analysts see it in Jordi Pujol’s obsession with setting up power structures that ensured the preeminence of Catalan culture. This influence is clearer in nationalist leaders who did not hide their xenophobic ideas, such as Heribert Barrera.

Nevertheless, the undeniable plurality of Catalan society, particularly its working class, traditionally convinced large swaths of the political elite of the need to devote energy and efforts to build a cohesive society, in which one’s place of birth (or that of their ancestors) wouldn’t be a relevant marker that could jeopardize welfare opportunities or upward mobility. Catalonia had to become “*un sol poble*” (“one single people”), where old and new Catalans could eventually identify under a shared national ideal. As such, and going by Benedict Anderson’s definition of nation, the Catalonia of “*un sol poble*” would be an “imagined community” of individuals and groups, fraternally united under a fictional but beloved construct, despite pervading differences and inequalities in the population and the more or less explicit suspicion and fear that would persist in some minority sectors.

The problem lies with the national ideal that different groups intended that new Catalans embrace. The idea of “*un sol poble*” has been brandished by well-meaning people trying to contribute to building a society where nobody would be left behind for lack of Catalan language skills; but also by those who used it for a nation-building project that could give way to the creation of a state of their own, thus depriving millions of Catalans of the chance to keep their citizenship ties with a country to which they still feel connected in many ways (ascribed and acquired rights, personal ties, emotional connections, etcetera).

It was hard to fathom that the project would end up led by a *Molt Honorable President* Quim Torra who proudly exhibited markedly ethnocentric and supremacist views in his written works both in social networks and traditional media. And I say hard to fathom because these views, although known to exist in the Catalan society, are fortunately quite marginal. Thus, according to the Political Environment Survey from the Center for Opinion Studies, only 13.5% of the population view being a Catalan native as something very important to be considered a true Catalan (although the percentage increases to 19% among the people whose mother tongue is Catalan). 21.9% consider "sharing Catalan customs and traditions" very important (30% among native Catalan speakers).



Source: Enquesta de Context Polític a Catalunya 2018. Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió.  
Elaboration Pau Marí-Klose

However, although Catalans holding ethnocentric views are a minority, the "*procés*" has elevated several of them to positions of public preeminence, where they got a chance to publish their views, usually in the form of small bits or memes that express supremacist ideas and spread the notion that society is split between good and bad Catalans.

Memes are cultural units of minimal information that appear recurrently in an identifiable and widely known way. A very common one in Catalonia during these "*procés*" years is to show explicit contempt for everything Spanish in a disinhibited and lewd way, often accompanied by offenses and insults. It often appears in humoristic contexts, in the form of derisive and provocative gestures that invite laughter in a group that shares (partially at least) the subtext. Comedians and buffoons such as Pepe Rubianes, Albert Pla, Toni Albà or Toni Soler have used their role to mainstream this type of interventions – emulating figures that in other contexts, have also played the populist card as comedians, such as 'Beppe' Grillo.

One notorious example, that achieved significant impact in media and social networks, was a tirade by the actor Pepe Rubianes in an afternoon TV program in TV3 [the regional public

TV channel in Catalan -TNJ in which he was interviewed: "Spain's unity can suck my balls from the front and from behind; they can shove Spain up their fucking asses, and see if it explodes inside and leaves their balls hanging from a bell tower; they can go take a dump in the fucking beach with the fucking Spain, I have been putting up with fucking Spain since I was born, to hell with the country...", Several versions of the video are posted in Youtube. They have over half a million views combined.

The key to the success of this kind of performances is that they leave no one indifferent. They manage to divide the viewers in two segments: those who consider them acceptable (as an expression protected by freedom of speech, for satire is just a form of protected speech) and those who take offense. The reaction of this latter group (which in the case of Rubianes ended up in a lawsuit for insults against Spain, eventually dismissed) becomes a resonance mechanism that amplifies the effect of the message.

This type of memes can also be used to insert stereotypes and prejudices over everything related to Spain. In talk shows and social networks there are true specialists in mockery and offensive derision: Salvador Sostres (during his nationalist stint, interrupted by his recruitment by country-wide media), Enric Vila, Mark Serra or Quim Torra himself are some of the best known. Others merrily join the party. Joan Oliver, ex-director of TV3, stated in a debate in the radio program *El Món* in RAC1: "Spaniards are Spaniards and they are thieves just by being Spaniards". In this sense, the assimilation of Spanish elements corrupts Catalonia, as suggested by sociologist Salvador Cardús on Twitter: "Corruption in Catalonia is a consequence of Spanish influence in the last decades". Although these remarks appear only occasionally, they connect with less explicit cues about all things Spanish, which are featured more frequently in Catalan audiovisual production. It also connects with opinion trends that are more vigorously expressed in social networks and in the streets.

Contempt for everything Spanish is often accompanied by praise for everything Catalan. Northern Europe is Catalonia's mirror. President Artur Mas, in an interview with Pilar Rahola in *La Vanguardia*, mentioned the existence of a Carolingian cultural DNA in Catalonia, originated from being part of the *Marca Hispanica* in the 9th century, "an umbilical cord that makes us more Germanic and less Roman" (24-1-2012). According to this view, Catalonia would not be a land of intermixed peoples where an overwhelming majority of people were either born in another Spanish region or have ancestors or relatives from outside Catalonia, or where Spanish is the most widely spoken language. Catalonia would have millenary roots that shape a singular personality, a genuine and irreducible *Geist*.

The most ludicrous extolling of Catalan culture are the efforts of the *Institut de Nova Historia* (INH) to provide a new historical perspective that fully acknowledge the historical role of the Catalan nation and make possible to divulge the Catalan condition of universal figures. Thanks to its works, we now "know" that Columbus, Saint Teresa of Ávila or Michael Servetus were actually Catalan, and that *La Celestina* or *El Lazarillo de Tormes* were originally written in Catalan, then translated and the originals destroyed. Some may think I'm talking about a fringe group of freaks ignored by the intellectual and political Catalan mainstream, and it is true that its discoveries do not make headlines in the news in TV3. But in 2013, ERC awarded the National Lluís Companys Award to the INH, and many

politicians and intellectuals have repeatedly mentioned their theses.

Not even the more seemingly serious academics miss a chance to assert Catalan superiority. An excellent example is an article published in *El País* on 4-11-2013 by Political Science professor Jordi Matas Dalmases, "Clash of political cultures". In it he distills Catalan and Spanish cultural features, without any references or supporting literature, into essential traits that explain the conflict: "An exceedingly Manichean perception of politics is prevalent in Spain. It is perhaps the result of an influential socialization process based on different manifestations (social, religious, political or military) of two irreconcilable sides within Spain. Spanish political culture tends to assess political reality in dichotomic terms, it does not usually distinguish between differences of degree and it is configured as a simplifying two-party system with PP and PSOE taking the leading roles, both in Congress and in most regional Parliaments (...). In Catalonia there is an ancestral culture of agreement which is a consequence of historical, geographical, economic and social factors. Such culture envisages political dynamics as the management of a bargaining process, of integration, of pluralism and also pragmatism". Others, such as lawyer and columnist Jordi Cabré Trias, head of the General Directorate of Law and Legal Entities of the *Generalitat*, prefer to not indulge in such long-windedness: "We are better" (Avui, 5-3-2015). Enough said.

With varying degrees of caution, several world-class economists joined around the *Col·lectiu Wilson* give credence to the idea that, by means of independence, a great economic leap forward is within reach for Catalonia. In several texts, independence is presented as an opportunity to get rid of old and inefficient institutional and economical structures and to establish a new set of rules of the game that would allow Catalonia to become a more attractive country for wealth creation and enjoyment. Although the reasoning for this belief that Catalan leaders and society would establish more efficient and egalitarian structures is never provided, they do state that Catalonia's preferences and interests, differing from those of the Spaniards, would be better addressed in the framework of an independent State.

This leap forward hypothesized by *Col·lectiu Wilson* economists stops being a mere hypothesis when retold by many nationalist politicians and agitators. They have no qualms about placing an independent Catalonia in the Olympus of small-sized economic powers in Europe, together with Denmark or the Netherlands, in case of remaining in the European Union, or Norway and Switzerland if it were not admitted in it. Some *Col·lectiu Wilson* members are infected with this enthusiasm. For instance, Economy professor Xavier Sala i Martín openly stated, in an interview in *Vilaweb*, that Catalonia meets the conditions to become a country as prosperous and competitive as Switzerland (5-1-2012).

Putting it a tawdrier way, writer Isabel Clara-Simó, stated the following prediction about independence in the journal *Avui*: "We will be the fourth European power, and Europe will be proud to finally have a civilized state in the South of the continent" (30-11-2010).

Rivalry and competitive pluralism are inherent to democratic societies. This serves a common, shared purpose beyond conflict. The adversaries compete in the search for goals, this is what motivates their confrontation. Enemies clash because they view each other's existence as an existential threat. Their ultimate goal is to destroy their opponent.

The tendency to split Catalans into good and bad has been entrenched in Catalan society for decades. It has repeatedly appeared in Pujol's nationalist discourse, particularly when he felt cornered by the Spanish public prosecutor during the trial against *Banca Catalana*. But the "*procés*" put the spotlight on new actors in the political scene who systematically deny to others the condition of mere political adversaries. Nationalist politicians refer to leaders of other political parties, representing hundreds of thousands of Catalans, as enemies in their statements. The People's Party and *Ciudadanos* became the target of harsh rhetorical attacks from the main leaders of the independence movement. In a few years the People's Party went from being an ally of Artur Mas' government in its first two years, to being accused of trampling over the freedom of Catalans and suppressing their legitimate right to decide. Regarding *Ciudadanos*, they were accused in the regional parliament of making the destruction of Catalonia their political goal (Homs, 11-12-2013). Their leader, Inés Arrimadas, was told to go back to Cádiz (where she was born) by Nuria de Gispert, ex-president of the regional parliament. Later, attacks extended to PSC socialists, branding them as collaborationists, in particular after the invocation of article 155 [the article in the Spanish Constitution that lets the central government take control of regional institutions -TN].

This rhetoric represents a true qualitative change that destroys the minimum bases for common understanding and hinders of dialogue of any kind. Inés Arrimadas admitted in a parliamentary speech that members of the two blocks do not even greet each other in the corridors (24-3-2018). Catalan politics has entered a phase of gradual deterioration of communication between groups, without any respite in sight. Simply hinting at the possibility of discussing something with the enemy, of accepting minimal conditions to begin a dialogue or to explore potential points of agreement away from the antagonistic positions set by the most radical implies a severe risk of being discredited by your own group.

It takes two to tango. Pushing ethnocentrism and supremacist ideas carries the risk of feeding similar attitudes in the group that feels threatened or attacked. These processes are widely described in the literature about civil and religious conflicts. Some, on both sides, seem eager for the mambo to begin (the CUP explicitly demands so in an election campaign video). Let's hope that a mature society such as the Catalan reminds them that a majority is not willing to break up.

*A Spanish version of this article has been previously published by Agenda Pública.*

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